

GEORGE LEE
RECENT COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION BY MOUSSA M. DOMIT

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
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INTRODUCTION

George Lee is one of a considerably large number of serious and highly creative photographers in the United States who is capable of producing work of museum quality but, due to the lack of professional encouragement and guidance (such as that given painters) on the part of schools, museums and foundations, must use the medium as creative supplement to their primary professions and are, therefore, obscure to the general public. This lack of professional support by art organizations stems from a series of lingering 19th century attitudes toward photography: that the medium is scientific rather than artistic; that it lacks the impact of true aesthetic and philosophical values one associates with traditional media (painting, sculpture, architecture); that photography is a secondary or minor art. These attitudes are reinforced by the recent proliferation of photography as a mass communication and documentation medium and its commercial implication compounded by the arbitrary compromise of quality.

Photography did evolve primarily as a science and, ever since its discovery nearly a century and a half ago, the medium has consistently imposed on the creative photographer two uncompromising limitations — the technical inflexibility of the machine and the stark realism of its images. It remained more or less a science through the 19th century; the camera was thought of as a valuable, magical instrument for man's visual recording of himself and the world in which he lived. In America, countless glimpses of the Civil War were preserved in stereoscopic prints. Soon after, new frontiers in the West were explored, surveyed and photographed for government archives. At the turn of the century, man became fully aware of the potential of photography as a medium for artistic expression. Gifted 20th

century photographers like Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston gave the camera a new dimension.' In their hands it became an interpretative instrument as well, producing "compositions" rather than photographic records. Their intimate and exhilarating landscapes illustrate a high value of man's vision and self-expression. Such are the attributes traditionally sought in all the visual arts.

To use a medium creatively, a thorough understanding of its techniques is, of course, necessary. In photography, however, the less the craft is involved and the simpler the process of making a photograph, the increased likelihood of producing an artistic work. Technically, the greatest essential for the creative photographer today (with advanced equipment and materials) is a complete knowledge of his camera and films and their technical limitations. The camera sees somewhat differently from the human eye and mind, so that the most creative aspect is the ability to see with the modern camera and lenses, and for most photographers, including George Lee, it is by working with one camera and one lens that the human eye and mind adapt themselves to the mechanical limitations and thus, almost instinctively, potential subject matter is revealed. Most of the creative work occurs before the film is exposed.

George Lee was 42 when he took up photography. (His life up to then did not lack creative activities. He was trained in painting and history of Oriental art. He had held curatorial positions in three major art museums and had written a considerable number of catalogues and articles on various aspects of the visual arts.) In keeping with the tradition of old and modern master photographers, he approached the medium as purely an art form; not as a creative supplement to his chosen profession but, perhaps as an ultimate substitute for it.

He believes in keeping his equipment simple, working with only one camera and one lens. He does not think it is possible to make a transition from one lens to another and still see almost spontaneously. George Lee first worked with black and white, turning later to color, after discovering that most of the problems of black and white photography have been

well-solved for their time — and probably ours — by Edward Weston and Paul Strand.

It is in the deserted and simplified sections of the city, such as an abandoned amusement park, that he finds his potential images: a concrete surface with peeling paint or chalk marks; a broken window; a heap of rusty containers; a withered old door. Similarly, a rocky shore offers a desired simplicity of backgrounds with the exposed edges of the earth and the presence of shells and pebbles under shallow waters. The shore also provides freedom of movement and undisturbed concentration. Most of George Lee's photographs are studies of minutiae in these common but neglected places (the entire Rock Series covers only about 200 feet of the Guilford, Connecticut, shoreline), and this relative limitation of the subject matter enables him to control the composition and present his ideas in a formal, but never rigid, design. By focusing on details, he is also able to escape "the tyranny of the immediately recognizable subject" without becoming totally abstract, to avoid the obvious and go beyond superficial surfaces. Thus, it is the reaction of the photographer that dominates the composition rather than the subject matter itself.

His preoccupation with formal design led him to use color as a form of composition. This is the most painterly and exciting aspect of George Lee's work. The significance of color, as can be seen in all the prints in the exhibition* is that it is an integral part of the composition on which the unity of the work is based so that if the structural design is eliminated the colors alone will hold the composition together as an abstract design. Eliot Porter in his color photography, particularly in his close-ups, emphasizes color as basic concept of design, although the beauty of nature remains the predominate factor in his work; whereas, in George Lee's work, nature is represented as a formal design.

* Here the general quality is slightly inferior to the transparencies, since, during enlarging and printing (a process which is not altogether perfected) certain colors — specifically in the Rock Series — have had their tonal range modified and, in some cases, darkened with a loss of detail.

It is difficult at this point in his career as a photographer to align George Lee with any of the modern trends — pure photography, technical, documentary or symbolic (see section for definitions) — although his aesthetic and interpretative approach, his continued search for design and texture fall in the realm of pure photography and its masters — Paul Strand, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams — for whom he holds the highest regard. Such photographs as Strand's **Rock, Port Lorne, Nova Scotia**, 1919, Weston's **Point Lobos**, 1930, or his **Picket Fence**, 1936, and Adams' **Surf Sequence** are possible sources of influence.

George Lee is neither abstract nor academic, neither vague nor obvious. His photographic work with his honest simplicity, purity of design and painterly use of color reveals a highly perceptive and poetic interpretation of natural and man-made forms that can be achieved only through artistic vision and creative minds.

MOUSSA M. DOMIT
Associate Director

TRENDS IN MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

1. **Pure.** This approach involves the camera both as an interpretative and a recording instrument. The underlying concept is aesthetic and usually conceived in the mind before it is recorded. The photograph is not often subject to drastic changes in the darkroom.

2. **Technical.** Here the process emphasizes laboratory techniques to alter the original impression of the subject matter, thus creating abstract images for emotional reaction. Man Ray is one who has experimented extensively with this process.

3. **Documentary.** As the term implies, documentary photography yields specific information about the subject matter and it records facts with straight-forward simplicity. It is extensively used by various facets of the news media.

4. **Symbolic.** In this technique, an attempt is made to translate in photographic terms the more formal concepts of the artist. This is true of nearly all aspects of creative photography, although here it is more strongly emphasized.

An asterisk preceding the catalogue number indicates that the photograph is reproduced.

All prints were made from 35mm transparencies.

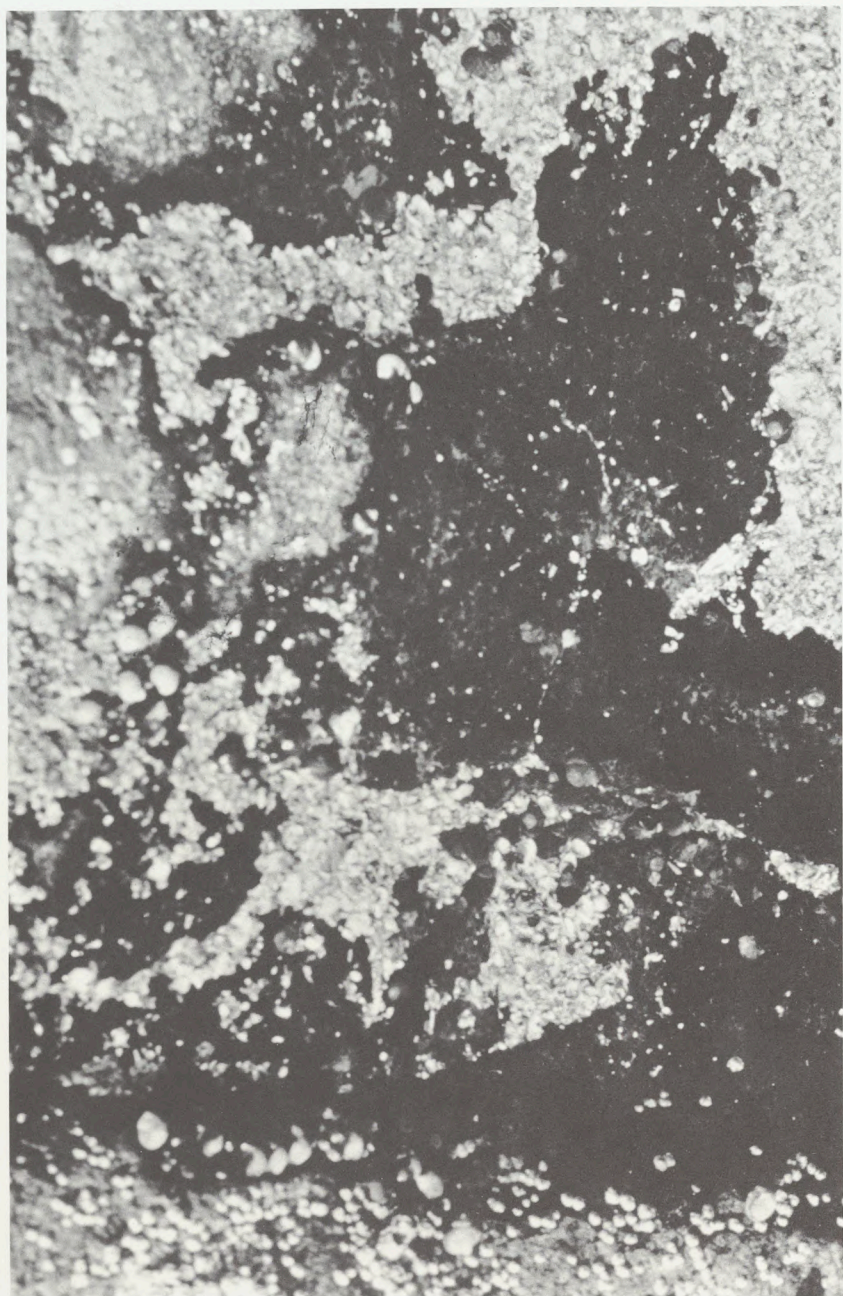
With the exceptions of Catalogue Nos. 38 and 39 which were taken in 1967, all photography was produced in 1968.

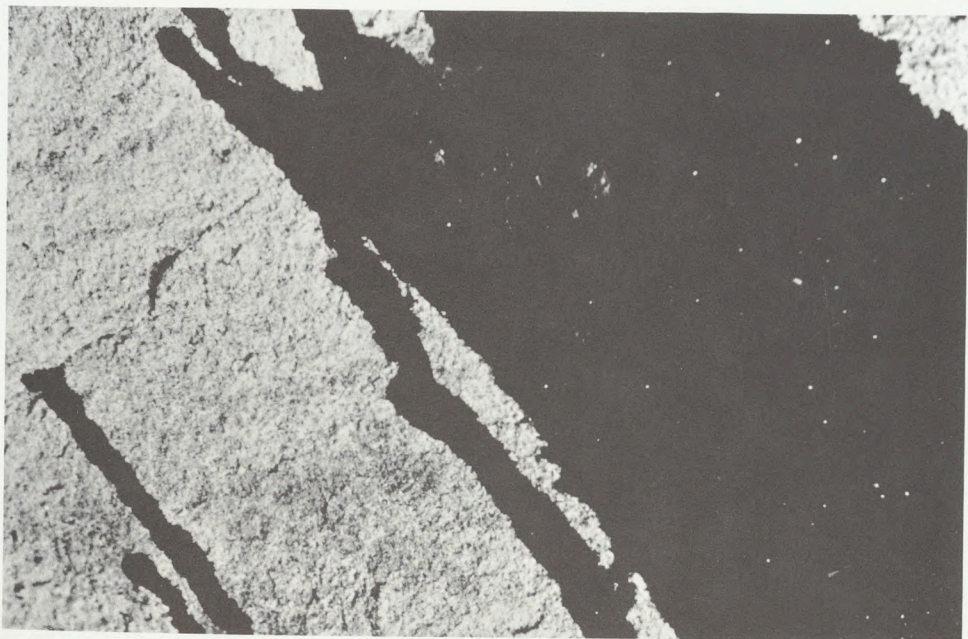
CATALOGUE

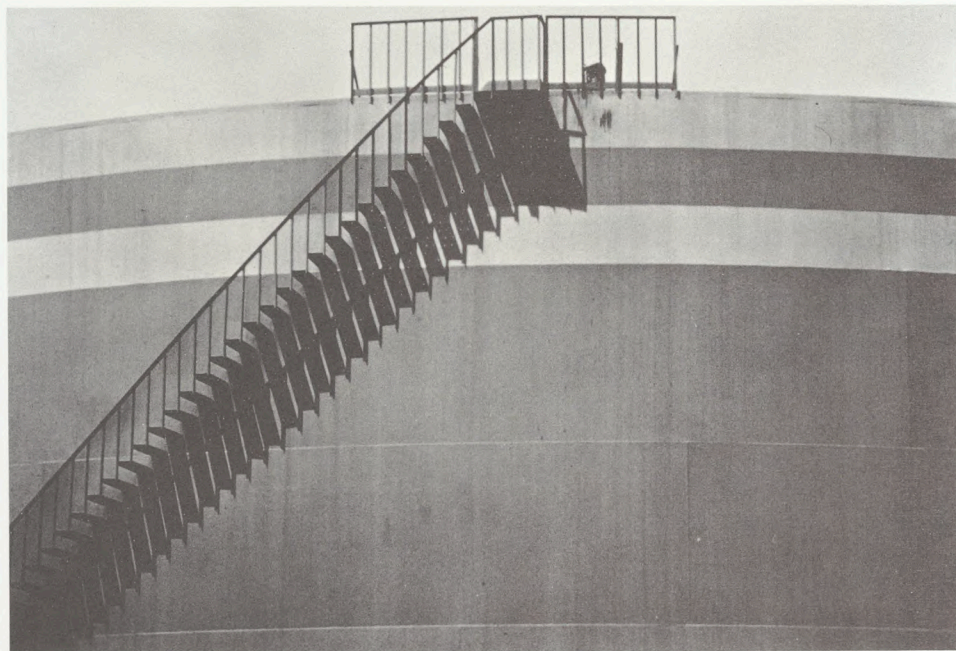
* 1. Painted Concrete, Number One	Savin Rock
2. Painted Concrete, Number Two	Savin Rock
3. Shiphouse, Number One	Savin Rock
4. Shiphouse, Number Two	Savin Rock
5. Debris, Number One	New Haven Harbor
6. Debris, Number Two	New Haven Harbor
7. Window Cover	Lighthouse Point
8. Storehouse Facade	Lighthouse Point
9. Metal Debris	Lighthouse Point
10. Paint Debris	Lighthouse Point
11. Chalk Marks	Lighthouse Point
12. Brick Wall	New Haven Harbor
*13. Gas Tank, Number One	New Haven Harbor
14. Crane	New Haven Harbor
15. Machine Surface	New Haven Harbor
*16. Boarded Door	Savin Rock
17. Broken Window	Savin Rock

18. Sea Debris	Sachem's Head
19. Rock Debris	Sachem's Head
20. Plant and Rock	Sachem's Head
21. Rock Series, Number One	Sachem's Head
22. Boat Detail	Sachem's Head
*23. Rock Series, Number Two	Sachem's Head
24. Rock Series, Number Three	Sachem's Head
25. Lashing	Sachem's Head
26. Rock Series, Number Four	Sachem's Head
27. Rock Series, Number Five	Sachem's Head
28. Rock Series, Number Six	Sachem's Head
29. Rock Series, Number Seven	Sachem's Head
30. Rock Series, Number Eight	Sachem's Head
31. Rock Series, Number Nine	Sachem's Head
*32. Rock Series, Number Ten	Sachem's Head
33. Rock Series, Number Eleven	Sachem's Head
34. The Sea	Sachem's Head
35. Rock Series, Number Twelve	Sachem's Head
*36. Rock Series, Number Thirteen	Sachem's Head
37. Rock Series, Number Fourteen	Sachem's Head
38. Painted Wall	Lighthouse Point
39. Painted Cases	New Haven Harbor











CHRONOLOGY

- 1919 Born in Boston. Father a successful hide and skin importer.
- 1923 Moved to California with family, living in Napa and Saratoga.
- 1929-1930 Family returned to the East, settling in Brookline, Massachusetts, 1930.
- 1936 Graduated Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire.
- 1940 Graduated cum laude in Far Eastern History from Harvard College.
- 1940-1941 Studied drawing, composition and color with two California artists — Frank Ingerson and George Dennison.
- 1942-1945 Staff member of Harvard Army Specialized Training Program (Far Eastern Language and Area Studies) and the Oriental Department at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard, simultaneously.
- 1945-1948 Chinese Government Cultural Fellow, Harvard University, working primarily with Langdon Warner. A.M. degree received in 1947.
- 1948-1949 Assistant Curator of Oriental Art, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard.
- 1949-1959 Curator of Oriental Art, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn.
- 1959 Curator of Oriental Art, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
- 1963 First serious consideration of photography — working in black and white.
- 1966 Began work with color photography.



